

Bangkok 2001

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IN THE MOOD FOR FILMS: BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2001

The prospect of watching a good selection of indie films from more than 20 countries and the best of Thai shorts in competition should be attractive enough for most film buffs but the 4th Bangkok Film Festival (15th-25th November 2001) also promised the presence of the legendary director Wong Kar-wai and his star Leung Chiu-wai at the Gala opening film, *In the Mood for Love* (HK, 2000) in what is now one of Thailand's most important cultural events.

Both honoured guests, however, failed to turn up to the disappointment of the eagerly-awaiting media and the many admirers at the grand opening. With hindsight, perhaps some other equally worthy film such as Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Pulse* (*Kairo*, Japan, 2001) or Tsai Ming-liang's latest masterpiece, *What Time Is It There?* (Taiwan-France, 2001) should have taken pride of place instead, knowing the unpredictability of Wong's schedules.

The honour of the closing film on the other hand, went to Oxide Pang's *One Take Only* (Thailand, 2001), the doomed love story of a young prostitute and a wise-cracking gangster on Bangkok's mean streets. Relatively new to the international film festival circuit, Pang proves he is a major talent. Showing technical prowess, the 90-minute urban thriller includes one of the best music scores heard recently and realistic acting from his two leads building to a cathartic conclusion of violence and blood.

Though the films by Wong and Pang show a big difference in the directors' personalities, thematically, they are about two lonely people attracted to each other in an impossible relationship. *In the Mood for Love* reveals a couple who turns to each other for emotional intimacy after discovering their respective spouse's infidelity without so much as sexual consummation. In *One Take Only*, the two protagonists would not have been drawn to each other were it not for the poverty and loneliness and the promise of money-making through the drug courier job.

Loneliness and the impossibility of man and woman connecting with each other stalked the film festival's major works. Kurosawa's *Pulse* (4th BFF's Audience Award winner), in the manner of a cyber-horror thriller, mesmerises with his existentialist probe into the nature of a computer virus that threatens to destroy the world.

The Giant Swing Award for Best Director went to the accomplished Tsai Ming-liang's contemplative, if not difficult film, *What Time Is It There?*, a story that inter-cuts between Taipei and Paris. The Taipei part shows a droll copy-watch seller and his superstitious mother going through the mourning rituals of his father. The watch seller becomes obsessed with setting Taipei time to Parisian time after his encounter with a local girl who buys his dual-time watch before she leaves for Paris. For the Parisian scenes, she appears to be increasingly isolated and haunted by strange shuffling noises in her billeted hotel room until she experiences a brief lesbian encounter.

Perhaps under the influence of his senior contemporary, Zhang Yuan, whose award-winning *cinéma-vérité*-inspired *Sons* (China, 1996) told a harrowing tale about a Beijing family of alcoholics playing themselves, director Zhang Yang's *Quitting* (China, 2000) is similarly a docu-drama about Chinese actor Jia Hongsheng who plays himself. A drug addict-cum-alcoholic who becomes increasing psychotic, Jia comes into conflict with his father who quits his job to help his son recover. The film won the festival's prize for Best Feature.

The Special Jury award went to *This Is My Moon* (2000) by the relatively new Sri Lankan director, Asoka Handagama.. The film explores the endless ethnic war, rape, jealousy and betrayal, through the story of a Sinhalese soldier who deserts the army after raping a Tamil woman. When he sets out for his own village, the woman follows him. On the other hand, Turkish director, Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Clouds of May* (2000) won the Best Screenplay award with his contemplative chronicle of a filmmaker who returns to his homeland to video shoot the changes that have taken place after his long absence.

Fans of Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien's latest film, *Millennium Mambo* (Taiwan-France, 2001), starring the exotic Shu Qi, were disappointed when it failed to arrive for the festival. It had shared the Technical Prize for Sound with Tsai Ming-liang's *What Time Is It There?* at the 2001 Cannes festival and thus was awaited with fervour. However, those who wanted to watch Shu Qi were compensated for in Mabel Cheung's brilliantly-shot but pretentious film, *Beijing Rocks* (Hong Kong, 2000) where she plays a temperamental lead singer caught between two men.

Hong Kong was better represented by two independent films of integrity: Mak Yan Yan's *Ge Ge* (*Brother*, 2001) and Carol Lai's *Glass Tears* (2001). The former is a journey of self-discovery for a young Hong Kong man who journeys up to northern Qinghai in search of his elder brother. The latter is a homage to Hong Kong's martial arts icon, Loh Lieh, who plays a diabetic grandfather in search of his missing grand-daughter with the help of a street-wise girl and her drug-pusher boyfriend.

As with all film festivals, it was the "major league" films taking up about 10 per cent of the festival selection that drew the biggest crowds. These were the conscience-driven films speaking up for the oppressed, particularly women in highly patriarchal societies. They included Marzieh Meshkini's surrealistic *The Day I Became A Woman* (Iran, 2000), Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (Iran, 2000), and Jagmohan Anand's *Sandstorm* (India, 2000) which kicked up a literal storm of controversy in India last year over the true-life story of a gang-rape of a woman potter campaigning for women's rights by three high-caste elders of her village in Rajasthan.

Black comedies, well-made and acclaimed critically, are the staple diet of festival goers. Here, Joel Cohen's *The Man Who Wasn't There* (USA, 2001) packed in the crowds with his understated but intelligent tale set in a small northern Californian town in the 1940s about a reticent barber who narrates his slow descent into tragedy when he decides to blackmail his wife's lover. Moving back to the present, American indie director Daniel Minahan's *Series 7* (2000) is a scathing satire of "reality" television shows like *Survivors*. Six selected "contenders" must kill or be killed in a competition that leaves the survivor to clinch the prize. The film makes sly digs at the almost surreal but harsh reality of tv ratings -- the more bizarre, the more audiences watching it, *sans* morality. It speaks also of today's live telecasts of brutal killings -- on both sides of the law. Another film with dark humour is Japanese strongman Kon Ichikawa's *Dora Heita* (1999), a samurai tale which works as a sort of political allegory about an unconventional magistrate who is tasked with reforming a lawless enclave teeming with smugglers, bootleggers and pimps.

This year's documentary films were largely well-chosen and the subject matter wide ranging. Among them were two incisive studies of two different film personalities currently at work -- the first was British film critic Tony Rayns' *The Jang Sun Woo Variations* (Korea, 2001) about the maverick Korean director whose oeuvre of controversial films include the 1999 *Lies*, the ultimate S & M sex film employing real-life amateurs who whip each other while having sex. The other was by Australian filmmaker Rick Farquharson on cinematographer Chris Doyle titled *Orientations: Chris Doyle -- Stirred But Not Shaken* (2000) with comments by Doyle and his regular collaborator, Wong Kar-wai.

Hunt Hoe's *Who Is Albert Woo?* (Canada, 2000) is an earnest enquiry into what constitutes the Asian male psyche or identity. The film introduced clips that reinforced Asian male stereotypes as well as interviews with the affable Hong Kong star Jackie Chan who reveals a softer side to his macho character.

Israeli documentary filmmaker David Fisher's autobiographical *Love Inventory* (2000) makes an engaging inquest into the disappearance of his twin sister, Sammy, who had apparently died some 5 decades before, buried under an unmarked grave. Here, he shows his close relationship with his other surviving siblings, especially with his actor-musician brother Ammon who, though diagnosed a psychotic, is a creative composer. Earlier it was shown and enthusiastically received by the Mass Communications students of the Chulalongkorn University to inspire them in their documentary film careers.

Docu-dramas were also accessible to serious film buffs. An example was Ariel Rotter's *Just For Today* (Argentina, 2000) about five characters in pursuit of their dreams. Another was the emotionally detached *Jacky* (The Netherlands, 2000), jointly-directed by Brat Ljatifi and Hu Fow Pyng. Hu plays a 25-year old railway waiter in Eindhoven still under the dominance of his mother and who takes on a mainland Chinese bride from a mail-order video. The film impresses with an innate sincerity without the usual Hollywood

histrionics.

Ever since Nonzee Nimibutr's breakthrough gangster film, *Dang Bireley and the Young Gangsters* (1997), there has been a discernible trend of new Thai films receiving critical as well as box-office success from leading film festivals in Asia and internationally. Other than *Daeng Bireley*, among them at this year's festival were Wisit Satsanathiang's *Tears of the Black Tiger* (2000) and Nonzee's current controversial period erotica, *Jan Dara* (Thailand-Hongkong, 2001).

The 4th BKFF also gave a retrospective of seven earlier works by veteran Thai filmmakers -- among them three major films -- *Butterfly and Flowers* (1985), *Once Upon A Time* (1994), *Fluffy* (1990). Although well-made, the recurring coming-of-age theme of the earlier Thai cinema was perhaps becoming a little stale. By the mid 1990s, however, a whole new generation of filmmakers who had cut their teeth making commercial video clips and music television shows were ready to try their hand at feature filmmaking. It was just as well, for by then the Hong Kong and even Taiwanese New Wavers were showing signs of decline and it was Thailand's turn to make a mark in Asian cinema. The arrival of new Thai films around 1997 also coincided with a wave of significant films from South Korea with its proponents of a new aesthetics in filmmaking. Others like Oxide and Danny Pang, twin brothers from Hong Kong who had transplanted their cinematic roots in Bangkok have also paved the way for a new Thai film renaissance.

The two major trend-setters, Nonzee Nimibutr and Pen-ek Ratanaruang went on to make the two box-office hits of 1999 -- the former with *Nang Nak*, a stylish version of a ghost story based on a Thai legend made many times over while the latter made *Sixty-nine*, a black humour thriller about an out-of-work banking assistant who escapes her triad pursuers over illegal money she unwittingly possesses. The sleeper hit of 2000 was Yongyoot Tongkongtoon's *The Iron Ladies* (2000) based on a true story which traces the development of a volleyball team of gays from northern Thailand. It attracted the attention of *Time Magazine* which helped promote the film's success internationally.

With the emerging trend of Pan Asian film collaboration, Thailand's young filmmakers appear ready to widen their cinematic horizons and the BKFF has an important role to play in promoting them. Moreover, with the active involvement of the Department of Export Promotion, the Tourism Authority and the Federation of National Film Associations of Thailand in getting more international and regional film people involved, the 4th BKFF is set on a path of expansion and its future looks promising.

References

AWARDS

Best Feature: *Quitting* (Zuotian, China), director Zhang Yang

Best Director: Tsai Ming-liang, Taiwan (*What Time Is it There?/ Ni neibian jidian*)

Best Screenplay: *Clouds of May* (*Mayis sikintisi*, Turkey), director Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Special Jury Prize: *This Is My Moon* (*Me mage sandai*, Sri Lanka), director Asoka Handagama

People Choice Award: *Pulse* (*Kairo*, Japan), director Kiyoshi Kurosawa

Thai Short Film Competition

Grand Prix: *Ror-for-tor-bor-khor-sor*, (director Mod- X1)

Special Jury Prize: *Destiny* (director Panu Aree)

Honourable Mention Awards: *Tawee's Sea* (*Talae Kong Tawee*, director Navarutt Roongaroon)

Fish don't Fly (director Pramote Seangsorn)

The Pink House (*Baan see chompoo*, director Suwan Huangsirirakul)

Red Bull Extra Award: *A Murder in the Garden* (*Kattagam nai suan*, director Saranyoo Jiralak)

Author Information

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